



Edited by

Mihaela Mudure and Aparajita Nanda

PASSING

Anatomies and Physiologies of Identity Transformations

Presa Universitară Clujeană

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Dedications:

To my past, present,
and future beloved family!

Mihaela Mudure

To Aashvi, Vikram and Aditya
You came, light came! Every dawn
in my life is for the three of you.

Aparajita Nanda

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Introduction

As an identity shift that has existed for centuries, passing is a strategy to change one's perceived identity that cannot be separated from colorism, or the preference for individuals exhibiting European-like bodily features. The results of the psychological study of colorism undertaken by Crutchfield et al. show that this predilection is a "historical trauma response [that] not only incorporates subjugation of oppressed African Americans, but can also incorporate resistance" (826). Passing can send mixed messages where oppression contaminates resistance and vice versa.

Van Gosse offers a well-documented history of passing, specifically of the fluidity and performance of race in the early years of the American republic (1790–1860). Gosse joins the contemporary historians who believe that "racial formation is ... determinative" (45) for the United States. The peculiarities of early American history made this new emerging political entity "a field of dis-order, contestation, and persistent opportunity for Americans of African descent" (46). Racial order operated at different levels and in different ways. Gosse emphasizes the fact that the "irregular character of the laws governing race and

citizenship provided persons of color with constant opportunities to flee slavery, to acquire property, and to claim citizenship, just as state sovereignty and Jeffersonian politics allowed ordinary white men remarkable personal liberty” (51–52). Passing, especially the black/white type, was inevitably linked to identity politics.

Ella Shohat constructs a different history of passing and introduces this identity transformation in her analysis of the representations of Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen: “The uncertainty about her [Cleopatra’s] looks ... has allowed each generation to shape her image in the form of its desire” (148). The result is a genuine “battle over her looks and origins” which must be located “within colonial domination, anticolonial struggles, and postcolonial racial frictions” (149). Cleopatra’s passing concerns both the historical queen and the recipients of her mythologized personality.

The desire to fix Cleopatra within one single complexion, or nation, or race—in a word, within one identity—proves to be futile, not simply in relation to the historical Cleopatra, but also in relation to the very project of imagining and accounting for the complex intercultural space with which she has been imbricated from the outset. (169)

Shohat concludes by pointing to the oldness, the historicity, and, to some extent, the inevitability of passing because the world is still a place that constantly changes, a space where a lot must and can be improved.

History is essential to understand passing. Only recently, namely with the postmodernist attack—both on the grand narratives and the central(ized) unique, coherent self,

impervious to changes, persuasions, or influences—that passing became a topic of utmost importance for scholars from various areas. For instance, in the Introduction to the anthology, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine K. Ginsberg insists that passing challenges essentialism. Passing is possible because identity categories are not inherent and unalterable essences. Passing means exercising one's agency and experimenting with multiple subject positions. Although the essays that Ginsberg collected insist on racial passing and are based on the Black/White binary, other studies incorporate more diverse approaches.

For instance, Randall Kennedy tackles passing as deception and analyzes its legal consequences in time. Catherine Rottenberg approaches passing from the psychoanalytical point of view, as desire. She envisages the desire to improve one's social and economic status as the engine of this whole process of change. In *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-century US Literature and Culture*, Gayle Wald argues that passing is an important topic in the knowledge production of our times because of its critique of racial essentialism. Maria C. Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg (2001) edited a collection whose essays are convincing arguments in favor of the performative perspective on passing. Kathleen Pfeiffer goes back to *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors' 1988 fundamental study, and integrates passing into the consent/descent dyad which is at the basis of American identity. According to Pfeiffer, passing is a form of autonomy and freedom and it is a strategy to solve the disconnect between what you are and what you want to be. She also appreciates that "passing is rich with literary possibilities"

(1) because it implies the social and political critique of the society where passing occurs.

Nella Larsen's well-known novel, *Passing*, has been read by Claudia Tate (1980) as the story of the tragic mulatto. But the interest in passing stories, in the literary re-presentation of passing, has been growing ever since. For instance, in 2020, Martha Cutter tackles racial passing in Charles Chesnutt's fiction starting from the general features of these stories:

As a literary genre in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, many African American-to-white racial passing fictions are built around a stable set of narrative conventions: the passer decides to pass, moves to a new location, takes on a new name and identity, and then either dies, returns to his or her "true" race, or moves out of the United States (usually to Europe). (189)

The specific point of Cutter's approach to passing is the realization of "the coercive functioning of simultaneous and multiple oppressions" (207). Consequently, Chesnutt's intersectionality, obvious in his preference for the "near-white women in the post-Reconstruction era" who "fail to achieve self-determination" (207) while men can, is most welcome. In a 2024 article, Beatrice Melocia Festa compares passing strategies that had been caused by shame in Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* and William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*. The aim of this comparison was to point the ways in which passing is represented in different ways according to the literary ideologies dominant at the time when these novels were written and published.

After the year 2000, racial passing includes many more variants than the white/black binary and the literary genres

where one can find it overpass the previous preference for fiction. Remarkable in this respect is Josephine Lee's 2022 study on American Theater: "Divas and Dancers: Oriental Femininity and African American Performance." Lee offers the reader fascinating examples of African American female performers who rejected the "feminized oriental excess ... through assurances of discipline and management, the refinement of sensuality, the selection of appropriate decorative scenic and costume choices, and virtuosic displays of musical technique and stylized choreography" (139). This article can be read in relation with An's considerations in her article, "Toward Useless Joy: The Erotics of Liberation and the End of Asian America," which starts from the Asians' landlessness when they arrive in the USA "as alien capital, international students or adoptees, and refugees of colonial wars" (250). This definition of absence by negation has made Asian Americans one of the ethnic groups more and more prone to passing. An interesting contribution to the bibliography of passing is Ambika Singh's article about ageism and ageist America as depicted in Arthur Miller's play, *Mr. Peters' Connections*. The hyperbolization of youth obliges the elderly to pass young. Besides a critique of America's treatment of old age, Miller also sends an optimistic message through his passing play: "life can always be refashioned despite much wear and tear" (171).

A very special case of passing is suggested by Gregory S. Jay who, according to Katharina Gerund, "recuperates White-authored texts that, despite their presumably good intentions, often promote racist thinking, embrace White privilege, or at the very least ensure White discursive authority on matters of

race" (349). The necessity to discuss the far-reaching consequences of White privilege led to this interesting discussion of white authors (Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Fanny Hurst) who pass(ed) as liberal authors but who are also inevitably influenced by their power position as white writers. Jay hovers on essentialism, but "his rigorous contextualization, critical self-reflection, and an awareness of the processes of racialization in American culture" (Gerund 349) help him escape from the exaggerations of contemporary woke culture.

Our collection aims to bring a new perspective on the much-discussed problem of passing. We focus on the politics of re-presenting passing in literature and we rely on a definition of passing based on medical metaphor. On the one hand, passing implies the relationships and the forms, the aspects of different elements of identity (the anatomical viewpoint) and, on the other hand, passing cannot exist beyond the way various identity components function (the physiological viewpoint). The ground of these medical metaphors is the fact that they combine very efficiently and evocatively our identity as a whole that is both described and set in motion. It is both static and dynamic. In this way, passing shows both the necessity and the dynamic of the change, the evolutions, the conversions, the metamorphoses, the renewals of our identities.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first part includes papers that connect passing with crossing boundaries. Ivan Balogh deals with Johnny Cash's transformation into a descendant of the first Scottish king from a half-blood Cherokee, the circumstances and also his agenda as a

shapeshifter. Claudia Davidson-Novosivschei revisits Peter Carey's *A Long Way from Home* by focusing on the forced collective passing of several generations, a painful episode in contemporary Australia's genocidal history. Adina Dragoș approaches passing from a posthuman perspective. Her analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* relies on the non-human characters' attempt to disguise themselves as members of a different species, such as the human one. Aparajita Nanda's analysis of Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*, introduces a critical postcolonial dimension to the phenomenon of passing—how this critical crossover expands the postcolonial concept of mimicry, a tool employed by the passer to attain his goal. Mimicry also opens up by way of a reverse dynamic how the phenomenon itself can claim and consume the passer fossilizing the person in the persona, thereby making him a victim of his own game.

The second batch of essays includes gendered readings of passing as identity transformation. Elisabeta Simona Catană bravely tackles Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, and asserts that, in her opinion, passing is a re-written story of one's desired identity. Monica Manolachi focuses on the anatomy and physiology of passing in *The Fifth Figure*, by the Caribbean writer Jean "Binta" Breeze. Mihaela Mudure introduces passing as the narrative engine of the short story "She Was the Weaker," by the Egyptian writer and women's activist Nawal El Saadawi. A bridegroom can continue to pass as a potent man by throwing the shame and the blame of his impotence upon his bride who does not bleed during her bridal night. And finally, Ana Voicu offers a reading of the Neo-Victorian novel *The Night Watch*, by

Sarah Waters, where a series of passing metamorphoses are anatomized in detail.

Finally, the last cluster is dedicated to passing in Jewish con-texts. Alexandru Bar builds on Tristan Tzara's and Marcel Janco's specific Jewish experience when they attempted to pass for Romanians in the hope of escaping antisemitism and discrimination. Nor can they pass as French or Germans, deliberately chosen alternative identities which might help them in their artistic career. Anna Branczeiz focuses on John Berryman's narrative essay, "The Imaginary Jew," where she analyzes the case of a Gentile forced to pass as a Jew in a certain troublesome context. Ștefana Iosif compares and contrasts different instances of Jewish "passing" while also underscoring the differences between Europe and America, in this respect. Iosif also scrutinizes how passing was employed as a survival mechanism throughout the twentieth century, and particularly during the Holocaust, by delving into cultural representations and personal narratives. The cluster ends with George Prokhorov presenting the case of Arkadii Kovner (1842–1909), a Jewish scholar well-known for having blamed Fyodor Dostoevsky for his anti-Semitism. Prokhorov analyzes Kovner's attitude towards passing taking into account his whirlwind life of Russian-Jewish journalist, writer, criminal offender, and minor official in the Congress of Poland who converted to Christianity.

The collection, *Passing: Anatomies and Physiologies of Identity Transformations*, shows the richness of the passing strategies and it is articulated as a space of scholarly display where researchers from several countries and generations prove their competence and creativity.

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